

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

For Release May 21, 1980

Inez Connor 202/343-5634

HUNDREDS OF ILLEGAL WILDLIFE MOUNTS SEIZED FROM 30 TAXIDERMISTS IN THREE STATES

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service special agents stunned midwest taxidermists last week when they served four arrest warrants and 34 search warrants on 30 persons suspected of large scale commercialization of migratory birds in Indiana, Illinois, and Wisconsin. Service officials said the multi-State crackdown would help stop this major drain on wildlife resources.

Upon serving the search warrants, agents seized almost 800 migratory birds, five polar bear hides, four guns, a large volume of records, files, receipts, and other paperwork, and two pieces of machinery--a meat grinder and a band saw used for butchering and grinding deer meat.

Agents conducted over 100 undercover investigations in the tri-state area during the past year and purchased as evidence 133 hawks, owls, and other game and non-game migratory birds that were illegally offered for sale during the course of the covert operations.

The Migratory Bird Treaty Act prohibits the killing, sale, offer for sale, and possession of migratory birds and under this law, a Federal taxidermy permit is required to mount migratory birds belonging to another person. The sale of properly marked and legally acquired waterfowl that were bred in captivity is allowed.

Those arrested were Edward Leep, Stanley Gawlinski, and Mitchell Pakosz of Schererville, Indiana, and Donald Pratt, Lebanon, Indiana. Leep was arrested

(over)

on a one-count complaint charging felony sale of non-game migratory birds. The case is expected to be referred to the Grand Jury in Hammond, Indiana, Tuesday, May 20. Gawlinski and Pakosz, employees at Leep's taxidermy firm, were arrested on one count misdemeanor charges.

Leep, a state permit holder and federally licensed taxidermist, owns and operates AAA Taxidermy from a large garage behind his home. During the course of the investigation, Leep is alleged to have illegally sold 29 owls, ducks, and song birds to agents and offered to sell them more than 20 other birds.

The five polar bear hides seized were allegedly imported unlawfully into the United States across the Canadian border in violation of the Marine Mammal Protection Act, which bans the import of polar bears into the United States. Special agents purchased one of the polar bear hides minutes before the search and arrest warrants were executed, and later seized the hides.

Agents also seized 185 mounted and frozen birds from Leep. He was released on bond and his employees were released on their own recognizance.

Donald Pratt, also a taxidermist, surrendered himself to U.S. Marshals in Indianapolis as a result of a warrant being issued for his arrest for the felony sale of migratory birds. Pratt allegedly offered for sale or sold 27 migratory birds to special agents. Special agents seized 19 birds from the shop under the authority of a search warrant. Eight search warrants were served to seven other taxidermists in Indiana and 129 birds were seized.

In Illinois, 17 search warrants were served to taxidermists and about 340 birds were seized--139 of them from the shop and home workroom of a licensed taxidermist in McHenry. Several dozen bird and animal carcasses also were seized from a freezer in the home and agents are investigating possible violations involving interstate shipment of deer.

After serving six search warrants in Wisconsin, agents seized 118 migratory birds, including many hawks and owls.

During the execution of the search and arrest warrants, 29 Federal agents were assisted by State conservation officers from the Illinois Department of Conservation, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, and the Indiana Department of Natural Resources. The cases will be brought before Federal Grand Juries by U.S. Attorneys in Indiana, Illinois, and Wisconsin.

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"Year of the Coast"